

Lessing's introduction to the translation of Aesop's Fables

1757

Aesop, the true or fabulous circumstances of his life, the arrangement and usefulness of his fables, the long series of his imitators, etc., would be a very fruitful subject for a lecturer who would find pleasure in saying the best-known things. In the hope, however, that no one will seek here what can be found everywhere, we believe we may merely indicate to the reader how the famous name of a *Richardson* came to be applied to a book which is entirely intended for the use and instruction of children.

Roger L'Estrange is the most famous compiler of Aesopic fables among the English. He has published a whole folio of them, five hundred in number; and subsequently, at the request of the publisher, added a second volume. His writing is considered by his compatriots to be one of the purest and most masterly, and his manner of narrating light, lively and full of humour. In the main work, too, justice is done to him in that his applications and moral teachings are appropriate, not trite, but rather emphatic and public-spirited.

But there were people - and where does a good writer not find such people? - who thought they had better taste, because they had different tastes from those of the satisfied public. A certain *S. Croxall*, in order to make room for his own progeny, had the charming idea of describing the fables of *L'Estrange* as dangerous, because he did not want to pass them off as downright wretched. Their author, he asserted, had shown himself not to be a righteous Briton, but rather an enemy of freedom and a thuggish advocate of the papacy and unrestrained power in this work, which was supposed to be written for a free-minded youth.

We owe the present work of *Mr. Richardson* to this reproach, even though it is not the most well-founded. He wanted to redress it with the most conscientious accuracy, and therefore partly to bring back to more general doctrines those fables to which *L'Estrange*, not without violence, gave a political interpretation, and partly to work on those which served no other purpose than political ones, with all possible sincerity of intention.

This was the extent of *Mr. Richardson's* first project. In carrying it out, however, he found that it would not be unhelpful to set himself further limits. He left out a good part, namely everything that was more a ridiculous fairy

tale than an instructive fable; he gave a better meaning to many of them, even those that were not political; he shortened; he changed; he added; in short, from the adoption it became a offspring of his own.

And a German reader will also be able to convince himself of this if he wants to remember that a large part of the fables of *L'Estrange* were translated into our language many years ago. Make the comparison, and it will certainly be to the advantage of the present one.

Who will allow himself to consider something mediocre in which the immortal author of *Pamela*, *Clarissa* and *Grandison* has had a hand? For who can know better than he what is most conducive to the education of the heart, to the instilling of human love, to the promotion of every virtue? Or who can know better than he how much truth can do for human minds when it deigns to borrow the enchanting charms of a pleasing fiction?

It is quite unnecessary to enter into a more extensive praise. Still less shall we dare to compare a *Bellegarde*, whose fables are now mostly in the hands of children, with a *Richardson*; for the Englishman, after the manner of the old Roman Tribune, would be justified in complaining, *se*

in ordinem cogi (<being in possession of the inviolable authority, not to be questioned> *even by the holder himself*).¹

Nothing has been omitted from the translation except the life of *Aesop*. In terms of appearance, however, it has been given a great advantage over the English original, both in terms of the copperplate and the printing. The publishers believed that a book for children should lack nothing that could appeal to children.

Leipzig, 17 March 1757.

¹ Pliny, Letters, Book 1, XXIII. To Pompeius Falco. Words only in italics quoted by Lessing; context supplied.